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Picturing Things

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Picturing Things

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
in
Fine Arts

by

Matthew John Bivalacqua

B.A. University of New Orleans, 2015
B.A. University of New Orleans , 2015

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Because of the knowledge and guidance shared by; Jeffery Rinehart, Cheryl Hayes, Dan Rule , and John Herndon, my work stands as it is. Their time, comradery, and advice is something I can only repay with pictures and reverence.

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Abstract

My creative process is a ritual I use to examine my personal narrative. Digital photography is a way for me to mine an object or environment with an obsessive emphasis, and extract an image that signifies something relatable. By employing tropes derived from my personal narrative, and filtering them through image manipulation software; I am able to dramatize aspects of perspective and scale. With an automatic mark guided by printed images and projections of digital panoramic images, the surface and resulting picture comes into focus. This is a way for me to move past my experiences. Achieving this level of intimacy with the mundane objects or environments makes it possible for me to develop a personal iconography.

key words:
painting / photo manipulation / surface / aesthetic

I.

The availability of digital cameras and their prevalence in the everyday has made it possible for just about anyone to experiment with the ways digital images can manipulate a subject and be manipulated. Relying on these digital photographic techniques in order to mine an object or environment for its ability to signify a trope from my personal narrative, I am able to control aspects of perspective and scale.

I am attracted to subject matter based on formal, historical, and sentimental qualities. Altering an image of an object or environment, and then rendering it, affords me a way to express the sentimental emphasis that I recognize in an object or environment. By combining projections of the resulting digital photograph, or a print of the digital photograph, with automatic marks I discover a surface that takes time to achieve.

My subjects are selected for their ability to stand for more than my personal narrative. In this way, the “I” expressed is the existential I.

- existential as in: “relating to existence.
- concerned with existence, especially human existence as viewed in the theories of existentialism.
- (of a proposition) affirming or implying the existence of a thing.”

The objects and environments I use for subjects are “ready made” like, in that upon finding them I recognize something beyond their literalness. They are “ready made” in their ability to express a versatile subject without manipulating objects or environments. It is not the model, object or environment, that I manipulate, rather it is the image which I subjugate. The models, objects or environments, are ready to go upon finding them. The expressive manipulation is done through digital photography, light, and a hand application of color.



(fig. 1)
Moving Her: "I'm just gonna put this here for a bit
8' x 5'
soft pastel on raw canvas

For example: *Moving Her*: “*I am just gonna put this here for a little bit*” (fig. 1) symbolizes, for me, a lot of the sentiments I was experiencing at the time, yet undeniably depicts a fish on a bed. It’s hard to say what the fish on a bed is about. When I first observed the fish on the bed, I recognized it for its symbolic properties. I know why I was drawn to it, yet the truth is in the title. The fish had been placed on this bed temporarily, while I was helping a friend move. The reason the bed, the fish, and room came into interaction was out of a necessity during the course of a move. It wasn’t all that odd of a thing, yet it was. What made the fish in the bed striking was my associations to what I thought it symbolized.

There is a contrary element to the *Moving Her* picture. The fish is out of water, taxidermied, yet has a phallic symbology that belongs in a bed. It’s challenging to completely express what the fish in the bed is about. The more I looked at the image, the more symbology I found. That is, the more familiar I became with the scene the easier it became for me to recognize what my observations meant to me.

The fish in the bed succeeds as an artwork because it acts more as an interpretable symbol rather than a universal one. Unlike the universal symbol where there is only one meaning, the fish and the bed implies something beyond the surface, something that has multiple interpretations. The “hard to say” element is recognizable, yet hard to articulate because there is no one way to respond to it. In my own experiences, I find these are the defining and significant moments shaping the spectrum of human emotional response, that my work fundamentally expresses.

Its hard to say what some things are about because some things speak subconsciously. Carl Jung says:

... there are certain events of which we have not consciously taken note; they have remained, so to speak, below the threshold of consciousness.

They have happened, but they have been absorbed subliminally without our conscious knowledge. We can become aware of such happenings only in a moment of intuition or by a process of profound thought that leads to a later realization and vital importance, it later wells up from the unconscious as a sort of afterthought.¹

Drawing from my personal experiences supplies my infusing my imagery with archetypes and tropes, in addition to my personal recognition and sentiments. My process is more automatic, as to encourage something sporadic, something beyond what I think. I approach each artwork in a similar fashion to how I approach people — randomly, and emotionally. Having recognized what a set of objects' or environment's relation can signify in a presentation, I stage in order to encourage what is required to see the subject symbolize a versatile set of sentiments. The pictures I make, as a result of my life practice, acknowledge and symbolize a recognizable relation. Their meaning is not solitarily definable, but I can express to my audience the variety of sentiments involved.

¹Jung, C. G., and Marie-Luise von Franz. *Man and His Symbols*: by C.G. Jung, and Others. Doubleday, 1964.p.23



(fig 2)
Portrait of President Barack Obama
Kehinde Wiley
2018

II.

Recognizing a subject for its versatility is something I do without consciously acknowledging what I am drawn to. I do not always know what the subject is about, yet the attraction is something reminding me of a particular sentiment or event. Some objects and environments, like the knife that killed Caesar, or the field at Waterloo; possess a heightened expressive element of show to tell. There is a feeling to the meaning — one which, as our sentiments would lead us to believe, is not exclusively confined to what is scripted.

Kehinde Wiley's *Portrait of President Barack Obama* (fig 2) expresses the persona of a man whose parental heritage was of Kansas and Kenya, who was born in Hawaii, whose hometown was Chicago, who is the forty-fourth President of the United States, and whose achievements have been impressionable, to say the least.

The purple African lily symbolizes his father's Kenyan heritage; the white jasmine represents his Hawaiian birthplace and time spent in Indonesia; the multicolored chrysanthemum signifies Chicago, the city where Obama grew up and eventually became a state senator.²

Wiley's garden symbolizes a nation of immigrants, among other things, an idea of national sentimentality. The flowers are symbolic for one identity of America. They symbolize a cultivation of culture, race diversity. The relation of these concepts evolve the flowers beyond beyond their inherent recognition. It's an aesthetic story appealing to one's subconscious sentimental association to imagery. The white Marilyn Monroe dress, or the Lincoln bible used to swear Barack Obama into office: these sentimental vessels carry a historical value as well as a symbolic language. They stand for more than their manufactured function in the way they reference a shared sentiment.

² Cummins, Eleanor. "The Botany in Obama's Official Portrait Represents His History." *Popular Science*, 19 Feb. 2018, www.popsci.com/flower-symbolism-barack-obama-portrait.

The way that we recognize an object's or environment's sentimental emphasis is through the narration of it's own history, through it's physicality. Allowing our sentiments a means of manifestation, we receive the subjects evolution through time and make associations with what we imagine. Often my recognition and attraction is visceral.

There is a Lily and There is a Lily (Fig 3) is an active expression. I found this image in a conversation. Staging it was an event in itself. The image that resulted from the experience signifies what I experienced in a conversation. Presenting this image evolves the event / object beyond it's intended function. The acknowledgement of it's history implies a symbology that belongs to more than the narrative which lead me to the subject. More often I find the nostalgic attraction of objects to be more creatively seductive than the desire to express a particular experience.

The fascination with particular objects and environments stems from their ability to symbolize something recognizable. It is a versatile message that is more subjectively comprehended than it is objectively signified. It is a kind of symbology, which Jung refers to as natural symbols. That is:

... derived from the unconscious contents of the psyche, and they therefore represent an enormous number of variations on the essential archetypal images.³

In contrast Jung describes the sort of graphic symbols; the peace symbol or the heart that symbolizes love, as being cultural symbols.

The cultural symbols are those that have been used to express "eternal truths," and that are still used in many regions.⁴

³ Jung, C. G., and Marie-Luise von Franz. *Man and His Symbols*: by C.G. Jung, and Others. Doubleday, 1964.p.93

⁴ Jung, C. G., and Marie-Luise von Franz. *Man and His Symbols*: by C.G. Jung, and Others. Doubleday, 1964.p.93



(Fig 3)
There is a Lily and then there is a Lily
Matthew John Bivalacqua
Encaustic Photograph



(Fig 4)
Four of Cups

Upright: Meditation, contemplation, apathy, reevaluation

Reversed: Retreat, withdrawal, checking in for alignment

The Four of Cups shows a young man sitting under a tree with his arms crossed, deep in contemplation and meditation. He is so engrossed in his meditation that he does not appear to notice the cup being presented to him by an outstretched arm. A further three cups stand at his feet, but again, he doesn't seem to notice or care about these new opportunities that have been presented to him.⁵



(fig 5)
Bull's Head
Pablo Picasso
1942



(fig 6)
Fountain
Marcel Duchamp
1917, 1964 replica

⁵"Four of Cups Tarot Card Meanings." *Biddy Tarot*, www.biddytarot.com/tarot-card-meanings/minor-arcana/suit-of-cups/four-of-cups/.

Tarot cards function in the manner of natural symbols. That is, they engage the unconscious as symbolizing a versatile range of ideas or sentiments. The four of cups (*fig. 4*) depicts a man sitting under a tree in meditation. There are three cups before him, and the fourth a cloud is offering to him. His arms are folded, a closed gesture that implies refusal. The picture implies a range of meaning, depending on how the picture is approached, how the card is drawn, whether it's inverse or not will determine what is being symbolized. It is a versatile engagement of the viewers' emotional association to the image. What the four of cups is about will be determined by its reception.

This practice of observing objects and recognizing a narrative is an old practice. It's the painted hands on the wall that say "I made it to the back of the cave," or the monument that declares victory and superiority. Duchamp's *Fountain* (*fig. 4*) and Picasso's *Bull's Head* (*fig. 6*) exploit the narrative property of our subconscious associations to objects. T. S. Elliot referred to this sort of visual association as using an "objective correlative."

The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an "objective correlative"; in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked.⁶

The following lines, from Elliot's "The Love Song for J. Alfred Prufrock", exemplifies the objective correlative:

Have known the evenings, mornings, afternoons,
I have measured out my life with coffee spoons;⁷

⁶Eliot, T. S., and Michael North. *The Waste Land: Authoritative Text, Contexts, Criticism*. W.W. Norton, 2001. p.120

⁷Eliot, Thomas Stearns, and Randy Malamud. *The Waste Land and Other Poems*. Barnes & Noble Classics, 2005. p.10



(fig 7)
A Portrait of My Love After She Left, from A Photograph She Took
 soft pastel on canvas
 2017



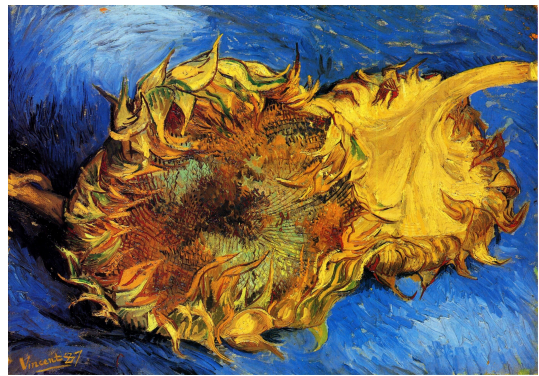
(fig 8)
Cigarette No. 125
 Irving Penn
 1972

Elliot's use of coffee spoons to measure something as momentous as "the evenings, mornings, afternoons" signify: something sweet, or something measured in singled doses. Such versatility has its use when attempting to express a measurement of life.

Objectively correlating my personal experiences in a visual expression is a means for me to filter my identity into the background. The correlative affords me a means to connect to the audience and reflect how we feel with a versatile symbol, authentically. By symbol I mean:

— a thing that represents or stands for something else, especially a material object representing something abstract.

A Portrait of my Love, After She Left Me, from a Photograph She took (fig. 7), signifies the sentiments associated with having a love initiate separation. At the time, I found it hard to put in words how the experience felt. I wasn't ready to acknowledge elements of the experience. I wasn't ready to bloom or wither; rather being in the moment was precious and obvious. Finding the photograph my former love had taken of the sunflower, I recognized the symbology I imposed on the object. The picture I created is a reference to the photograph I found. The photograph was a symbol for how I felt, who she was, what we were not. I didn't have to include much with my picture, other than a title, in order to set the scene. I recognized the found photograph for its reference to Van Gogh's *Two Cut Sunflowers*.



(fig 9)
Two Cut Sunflowers
Van Gogh
August - September 1887

An objective correlative also possesses an element of identity, when presented in the right way. Irvin Penn's cigarette butt series, symbolizes a collection of identity. Represented by how the butt was discarded, what kind of cigarette was it (filtered, unfiltered, cigar... etc.), and how it was used (whether it has lipstick on it, is used only half way, or how it was put out). *Cigarette No. 125 (fig. 8)* is such a collection. Enlarging the photographs to larger than life scale, Penn humanizes the objects we use through accessing their history in our imagination.

III.

More than engaging through a recognition of imagery, I intend for my pictures to express an aesthetic value. In *A History of Pictures*, David Hockney defines a picture as “an account of looking at something.”⁸ Differentiating photography and hand applied media (painting, drawing, etc.) as methods by which an image is fixed, Hockney sees the source for every image as either being “eye-balled”⁹ or “captured by a lens.”¹⁰ The difference in how the image is fixed will determine the kind of picture it can be and how it will function. Hockney’s terms were helpful in focusing my intention on the kinds of pictures I wanted to create, and how they would work in relation to one and other.

Beginning with a photograph is a means for me to distill my sentiments and focus on the artisanship of a picture. Inspired by Hockney’s photo-scapes and the recent endeavor to photographically map ancient ruins, museums, and cityscapes, I began to photographically map my subjects. Digitally distorting perspective and details, is not enough. For me, stopping at the photograph implies an a sense of physicality that originates to closely to actually exists.

My pastel surfaces contrast the encaustic photographs in the way they reference the photographic source. I like to think that my pastel subjects are emphasized by a sense of preciousness and sentimentality. The pastel canvases are ephemeral and possessive of attraction as opposed to the preservation of attraction that occurs in the encaustic photographs. Whereas coating panoramic photos with encaustic painting, is a way for my sentiments to invade a representation of the physical world. Considering the photograph’s ability to capture physical elements and manipulating that representation, is reflective of how my perspective is filtering the subject.

⁸ Hockney, David, and Martin Gayford. *A History of Pictures: from the Cave to the Computer Screen*. Abrams, 2016. p. 8

⁹ Hockney, David, and Martin Gayford. *A History of Pictures: from the Cave to the Computer Screen*. Abrams, 2016.

¹⁰¹⁰ Hockney, David, and Martin Gayford. *A History of Pictures: from the Cave to the Computer Screen*. Abrams, 2016.



(fig 10)
digital photograph (source image for *A Lamentation for Breaking Father's Model, in Response to his Death*)

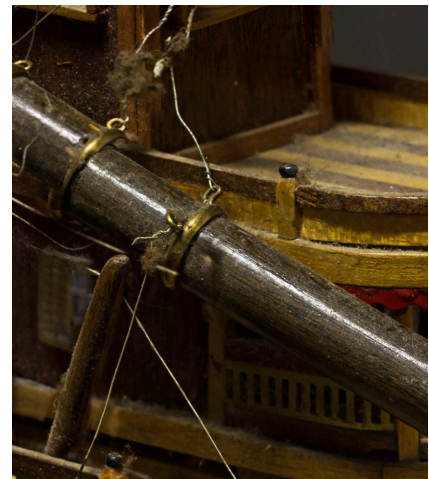


(fig 11)
A Lamentation for Breaking Father's Model, in Response to his Death
Matthew John Bivalacqua
soft pastel on raw canvas
2016

The pastel surfaces and encaustic photographs have a different aesthetic value that contributes to the essence of the picture. The pastel is chalk fixed to a stretched canvas, that have this “I want to touch” feel. Whereas, the encaustic photographs are photographs mounted, coated in wax, then oil color is applied and the wax is re-opened to allow the color to settle on the photograph. The result is an encapsulated mixture of digital photograph and paint that plays on manipulation and representation.

The mixture of digital photography, software manipulation, painting and drawing from projections, and photographs result in a picture that is meant to be experienced. My pictures are a conflict. In a sense, the aesthetic value of the pastel surface is rendered, impermanent, delicate, attractive. Where as the aesthetic value of the encaustic photographs is photogenic layered and reflective. The image is trapped under wax, oil, and painting.

Figure 10 is the panoramic / composite source image for *A Lamentation for Breaking Father's Model, in Response to his Death*. Some of the micro detail is lost, such as the dust that had collected. These details are what I consider part of the image's authenticity. My aim was to over emphasize using scale. The resulting eight foot by five foot canvas possesses a different sort of physical presence that an encaustic would not, even if printed at this scale. *A Lamentation for Breaking Father's Model, in Response to his Death* (fig. 11) is sensually emphasized by scale, texture, and ephemerality. The pastel's fixed nature to the canvas is as fleeting as the sentiments that I am expressing. The preciousness of the pastel surface reflects the sentimentality of the subject matter. The surface is intended to be an experience.



(fig 12)
close up of digital
panoramic photograph (fig 10)

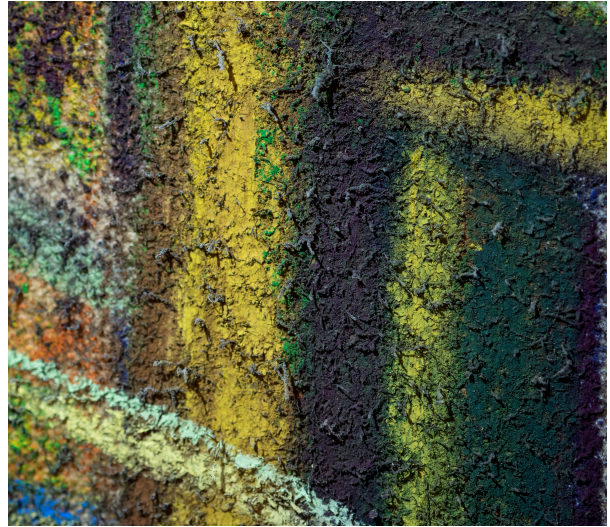
Working pastels into a raw canvas creates a specific kind of relation to the surface. There is some tension in there. The larger than the model scale intends an abstract expressionist dance with the sublime. Unlike the abstract expressionist sublime, from an arms length the surface is



(fig 13)
Changing for Service
Matthew John Bivalacqua
encaustic photograph
2018

more than a horizon line or confrontation with color fields. The dance is a breakdown to the particle plane. The personal experience with the large scale pastel canvases places the recognition in a narrowed view. I want to touch the surface but to do so would be to blemish what has been rendered.

Figure 13 is macro image of *A Lamentation for Breaking Father's Model, in Response to his Death*. The texture is a collection of soft pastels caught on the canvas fabric. The stretched cotton comes unraveled a bit. Dragging soft pastels across the taut surface also creates a bit of static electricity. The build up of the surface is event in of itself.



(fig 14)
micro shot of *A Lamentation for Breaking Father's Model, in Response to his Death*

Whereas the pastel and oil canvases are more expressive, the encaustic photographs retain more of the camera's presupposed objectivity. *Changing for Service* (fig 13) plays a sort of Roger Rabbit game, in the way the photograph relates to the rendered imagery. The photographic image is hazy under the wax and color.

It is not always clear what direction the image will go, at first. In part because the subjects are personal and I become overly invested in them. Suppressing desire in the ritual of the creative process, leads me to an understanding I didn't have prior. In many ways, I am as much as a receiver of my work as I am the sender.

VI.

My creative process is some what of a life practice. Some of my images take years to find, while others present themselves more immediately. Recognizing subjects, externalizing experiences through their history, was not something that was taught to me. It developed out of a need for self-control and deeper understanding of my experiences.

I trust in traditional creative techniques to elicit an expression from me. Editing is a huge part of it. In trusting the camera's abilities and function, in being familiar with the dramatizing effects of lighting, and with attention to the aesthetic result; I am encouraging an automatic expression and embracement of my emotive state.

Painting is vastly satisfying. Even more so, deriving a precious or delicate surface adds a justifying component to my process. I developed my method for mark making from these sensations.

Embracing the delicacy of wax or dry pigment on canvas, requires me to accept my obsessive behavior and transform it into an outlet for something pictured, something considered.

History will surely have a dramatic effect on the physical qualities of my work. That inevitability is something I require a process to embrace. Everything deteriorates. The objects I depict will themselves decompose over time. What's left is a process of consideration that is an important part of being human.

V. Bibliography / Images

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Vita

Matthew John Bivalacqua was born in Metairie, Louisiana. He obtained Bachelor's degrees in philosophy and fine arts from the University of New Orleans in 2015. He was admitted into the graduate program at the University of New Orleans to continue his pursuit of painting.